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ABSTRACT

This article examines a collaborative practice-based research project. It recounts the experiences of a kindergarten teacher as she implemented a program to increase family involvement in education. The text is based on classroom documents, parent meetings, and parent interviews. The setting for the narrative is a Basic School, a type of school founded on the vision of Ernest Boyer that positions parents as a child's first and most important teachers. To facilitate parent participation, the teacher reviewed the literature on family involvement and then chose a strategy that would lead to a genuine collaboration between home and school and thus bring families closer to their children's education. The report describes the tactics the teacher used to learn more about the children and their families and what these families viewed as priorities. It discusses her decision to use the activity-based assessment (ABA) inventory to guide conversations about what families wanted their children to learn and how the ABA served as the organizing principle for a series of family meetings. The document evaluates these efforts to involve family members in their children's education and the decision to use practice-based research to analyze these efforts. It details the extent of involvement and the subsequent results. (Contains 12 references.) (RJM)

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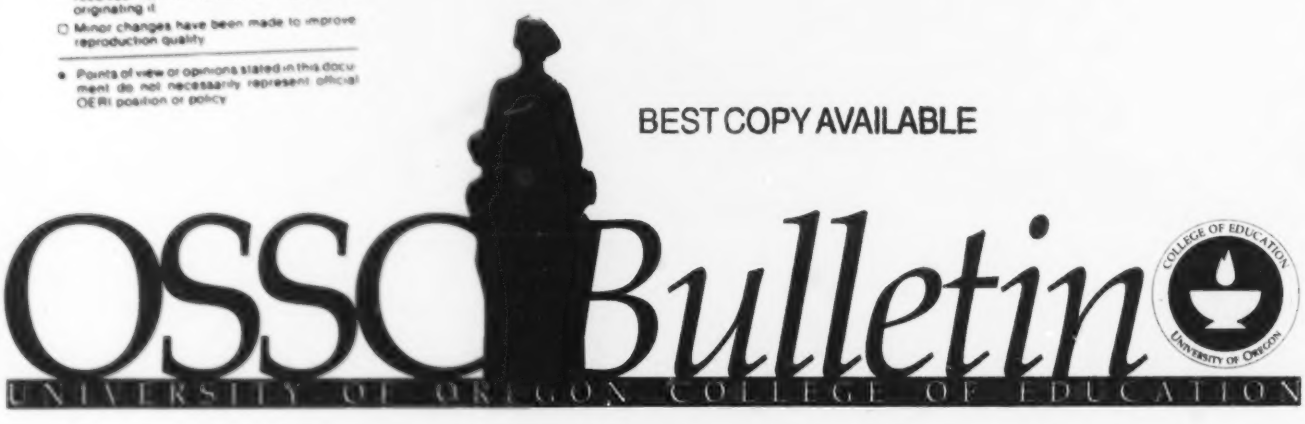

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CENTER ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION · UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

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Family Involvement in Education

Introduction

This article reports the results of a collaborative practice-based research project. Schools face a dizzying agenda for change and improvement as they approach the 21st century. Students bring more differences to learning than ever before. Teachers must find ways to help very diverse groups of students achieve to the new higher standards demanded by our changing society. One important way teachers are responding to these demands is to inquire into their own practice as they seek to change it. Really understanding what happens when a teacher tries a new idea, implements a new state or district requirement, or tries to meet the challenge of a new and different student promises to really change what happens in schools for both teachers and their students.

This example of a teacher's (Janet Williams) practice-based research was supported by two collaborators. Hafdis Gudjonsdottir, a fellow teacher and doctoral student, helped Janet ask and answer her questions about families and their role in teaching and learning. As a co-researcher, she and Janet examined classroom documents, observed parent meetings, interviewed parents, and pored over the resulting information trying to understand what it all meant. Dianne Ferguson, a university professor, provided coaching and support to both teachers throughout all the phases of focusing an inquiry, collecting and understanding information, and writing up the results. What follows, then, is a joint effort of three educators very interested in families, schools, and learning. We have chosen to write the account in Janet's voice since she is the teacher inquiring into her own practice. Listen to Janet.

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Family Involvement in Education

Several years ago, I was hired to teach in one of fifteen schools in the nation recognized as a Basic School by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Basic School was founded on the vision of Dr. Ernest Boyer. The first priority of the Basic School is to create a place where everyone comes together to promote learning (Boyer, 1995). Parents are regarded as essential partners in the Basic School. According to Boyer, parents are the child's first and most important teachers. Boyer describes the positive impact parental involvement has on academic achievement, behavior, and attitude about schooling. Boyer also explains that parents want to be more involved in schools but are confused about how to accomplish this. He provides a detailed plan for parental involvement that includes activities for the first day of school, a covenant for participation in learning, and a student inventory that is a format for gathering information about children.

My role in our Basic School was to teach the youngest children, those who were entering the public school system for the first time. As one of two kindergarten teachers, it was my responsibility to welcome these children and their families into our school community – it was my job to begin building those valued connections between home and school.

The emphasis in education on building partnerships between schools and families provided assurance that my desire to work closely with families was an important pursuit. Still, I began to consider such questions as, Are teachers really interested in building partnerships with families? Can parents become genuine partners in their children's education? Could I effectively involve families in the actual teaching and learning that occurs in their children's lives?

In order to answer these questions for myself, I talked with educators about their views on family involvement. Most of the teachers I spoke with valued family involvement. Their description of involvement centered on parents volunteering their time in order to provide a service to teachers and students. Miscellaneous clerical work and materials preparations were among the most common services provided by parents. A few teachers reported that parents listened to children read and assisted students who needed extra help. When asked about involving parents in other aspects of education, such as participating in decisions about the teaching and learning of their children, many of my colleagues felt these decisions should be left to the schools. One colleague explained that even though parents may well be experts on their children, educators are experts on teaching and learning. Others indicated that parents were already involved in decisions that affect teaching and learning at the district and building level through participation on various committees and site councils. When I spoke with parents, they voiced an interest in becoming more involved with their children's education. Among those families who expressed a desire to become more involved, there was an interest in participating in some of the decision-making that would directly affect the teaching and learning of their children.

My Rationale for Inquiry

In order to learn more about family involvement in education, I began to explore the professional literature. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the amount of information available on the issue. For example, Epstein (1989) discussed types of family involvement in education. According to her, parental involvement in planning for teaching and learning appears to be limited to serving on advisory councils or committees. She also does not mention collaborative planning between teachers and parents in the interest of individual students or small groups of students. Epstein suggests that parents want to help their children, but need direction and specific information about how to help. She indicates that research on parent involvement in urban, rural, and suburban schools shows seventy-five percent of parents want to become more effective partners with schools and teachers. Lareau (1994) includes several recommendations for programs that promote parental involvement. She underlines how important it is for educators to consider the academic benefits of parent programs, suggesting a shift from activities such as back-to-school night and open house, which have minimal academic benefit, to activities like individual conversations with parents.

Daniels (1996) states that parents should be more involved in all aspects of education, including decision making regarding curriculum and teaching, although he also notes that parents are actual partners in curriculum planning in few schools. Daniels argues that one of the barriers to genuine partnerships is that many teachers fear parent participation and view parents as adversaries. His article recounts a situation where parental involvement was mandated by school district reform laws. After eight years, initial fears were overcome, resulting in successful partnerships that support student-centered learning.

Another study (Dodd 1996) also addresses the importance of involving parents in planning processes. According to Dodd, educators need to work harder to ensure that all parents are included in the process of change. Results of a survey of five hundred parents and community members indicate there is much work to be done if parents and educators are to arrive at a shared vision of what children should learn. The importance of finding out what parents think students should know and be able to do and how they can acquire those skills is vital. Dodd suggests that a survey and follow-up interviews with parents and other community members is one way to gather this type of information. Further, she believes that no one has all the answers, that we must all be learners, and that we can all be teachers.

Aronson (1996) shares the view that parental involvement can result in improved academic achievement. Aronson explains that parents do not get involved in their children's education for a number of reasons, including cultural differences, educational background, and work responsibilities. She reports the findings of a study of nine schools in which parental involvement increased by forty-five percent. The researchers found that parental involvement increased once parents became involved in the school's decision-making processes. Researchers also found that as parents became more familiar with the curricular aims and learning activities of the students, they were more supportive of school personnel. Steps for improving parental involvement included clarifying the form partnerships will take, developing strategies for including parents in different family situations, informing parents of ways they can become involved with the school, and involving parents who are hard to reach or reluctant to participate.

A Way to Achieve My Goals

In order to involve the families of children in my classroom in their children's learning, I was interested in using a process similar to that described by Boyer (1995). I wanted to develop a genuine collaboration between home and school in order to bring families closer to the actual teaching and learning in their children's lives.

As a master's student at the University of Oregon, I encountered a most valuable resource in a module designed by a team of teachers and researchers (Ferguson et al. 1998). The module provides a framework for curricular decision-making and strategies for gathering information about students in collaboration with families. It also provides teachers with a variety of tools for designing "individually tailored" learning activities for very diverse groups of students. I encountered the information in this module as it was undergoing revision and realized that the activity-based assessment inventory (ABA) was a concrete way of guiding the conversation with families about what they wanted their children to learn in my classroom. I agreed to help the writing team pilot a new format for the ABA.

Let me provide a brief description of the ABA process. The inventory includes activity lists representing a broad range of real-life activities. The teachers who developed it originally interviewed parents of children of all ages to identify the kinds of activities children and youth actually engage in when they are living their lives inside and outside of school. There are several lists, each for a different age group. I was naturally interested in the one designed for children five to eight years old. Table 1 lists the domains and activity categories included in each of the lists and Figure 1 depicts one page from the five to eight years list.

The ABA also includes an interview guide to help structure the conversation between home and school participants, and a format for summarizing the information gathered during the conversation. These lists were originally developed to be used individually during home visits or other meetings with parents and children. Some children may benefit best from such an individualized approach. However, few teachers could hope to do such individualized curriculum planning with all their students. Fortunately, the module also includes a variety of ideas for using the lists with a whole class of students. In fact, Hafdis was one of the first teachers to pilot these whole class procedures.

I first used the ABA with several individual students and their families. I found the conversations helped me understand a lot more about the children, their families, and their educational goals than all the other information available to me through school records. After each meeting, I talked with the families about the process. They reported enjoying the experience and felt other families would benefit from similar involvement. I think they especially enjoyed talking about what their children knew and could do in their daily lives, which is exactly what the process was supposed to elicit. One parent had such good feelings about our work together that she offered to help lead other parents in a group meeting to discuss curriculum considerations for their children. Perhaps it was partly this parent's enthusiasm that urged me to try the ABA assessment with my whole class. Hafdis also talked with me about her experiences using the tool and was as enthusiastic as the parents. From our many conversations I gleaned the practical and teacher-friendly information that would eventually lead to real change in my practice.

Changing My Assessment Practices: The Family Meetings

In order to provide meaningful learning experiences for the children in my kindergarten classes I wanted to discover as much as possible about the children and their families. I wanted information about the children, their lives outside of school, and the interests and preferences they brought to my classroom. Understanding what their families viewed as priorities for learning and what the children themselves wanted to learn and experience was of primary importance to me as a teacher. My experiences with the Activity-Based Assessment suggested

TABLE 1: LIST OF DOMAINS AND CATEGORIES FOR THE 5-8 YEAR OLDS

Careing for Self, Friends, and Family

BEING A FRIEND

- Initiating and maintaining friendships
- Communicating with friends
- Social acitivites

FAMILY MEMBERSHIP

- family fun
- kitchen
- bedroom
- outside
- miscellaneous chores

PERSONAL CARE

- morning/bedtime
- bathroom/grooming
- personal stuff
- personal safety

PERSONAL MANAGEMENT

- schedules and appointments
- accessing/using resources
- money
- leisure

Contributing to Community

SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP & COMMITMENT

- school
- school jobs/chores
- school participation

COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP & COMMITMENTS

- group membership
- volunteering

JOBS & CAREER

- after school jobs
- weekend jobs
- vacation jobs

Contributing to Community

MEDIA

- reading
- listening/speaking
- watching/interacting

EXERCISE AND FITNESS

- outdoor recreation
- indoor recreation
- team/group games and sports

EVENTS

- community events
- entertainment events
- cultural events
- sports events
- travel events

GAMES, CRAFTS & HOBBIES

- playing games
- creating art
- creating needle crafts
- collecting
- photography
- construction/playing with
- music
- science
- languages

Ages 5-8

How? When? Where? does s/he do these things now? Feel free to check, underline, make notes everywhere!

Jimmy

EVENTS

Eugene & Orange

7. Community events
   - going to/participating in fairs, festivals, exhibits museums
   - going to/participating in community events for kids, families - yes. (especially holidays)
8. Entertainment events
   - going to movies
   - going to car rallies, pet shows, races, air shows, etc.
   - going to zoo, planetarium, aquarium - yes, Sea World
9. Cultural events - historical
   - going to art shows, museums
   - attending/participating in cultural performances: concerts, plays, dances - no
10. Sports events
   - attending/participating in sports competitions - yes, Mighty Ducks

Which ones does s/he want to do

Go to dances

GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES

12. Playing games - Backyard & playground
    - board games yes, Candyland
    - video/computer games
    - toys/Lego's/dolls, etc.
13. Creating art
    - drawing/painting yes, coloring
    - calligraphy - no
    - ceramics - yes
    - woodwork/metal work - no
    - jewelry making - no
    - stained glass - no
    - origami
14. Creating needle crafts
    - sewing - no
    - knitting - no
    - weaving - no
    - crocheting - no
    - leather work - no
15. Collecting
    - coins - yes
    - stamps - no
    - stickers - yes collecting seashells
    - rocks - yes
    - trading cards - no
16. Photography
    - using a camera - no
    - putting in a photo album - no
17. Constructing/playing with
    - models - yes
    - kites - yes
18. Music
    - singing - YES!

Which ones does s/he want

Ceramics

Activity Based

Schools Projects Fall '96

Figure 1. Sample Page from 5-8 years list.

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that I could learn all these things by using the ABA as a regular part of my assessment repertoire.

Each family was given the activity list for children of kindergarten age during our individual orientation meetings before school started. During these meetings I also explained my purpose for gathering the information. I encouraged families to spend time reviewing the activity lists with their children, to identify strengths, interests, and areas of need. I explained that I intended to invite all the families of my students to *"share information gained from their work with these lists...to identify ways we could work together to make the school year especially successful and productive for all the children."* I also explained that the information gathered from their work with these lists would *"help me design additional learning activities that would be meaningful for their children,"* and that I was *"especially interested in making certain that whatever their children learned would be interesting and have some usefulness in life outside of school."*

At the time I had no way of knowing the extent to which the lists would help me shape what became the year's curriculum. No one could have predicted the impact these lists and the work surrounding them would have on my work as a teacher, my relationships with students and their families, and the teaching and learning that would occur during the school year. I was also a bit apprehensive about my ability to incorporate all of the parents' ideas. As I cautioned in a cover letter attached to the lists: *"Naturally, I will not be able to work directly on all of these things during our time together, however, just knowing about the interests and preferences of you and your child will be very helpful as I design lessons and activities."*

When I scheduled the parent meetings to review the activity lists, I assumed we would work together for an hour or two. I scheduled one meeting for families having children in the morning session of kindergarten and another for families of children in the afternoon session. At each meeting I planned to facilitate a discussion among families about their priorities for learning and hoped we would identify several common interests in each of the domains that I could weave into the kindergarten curriculum I was already using. Following the meetings, I planned to review our findings and distribute a written summary to families with a few ideas of how I might embed some of the identified activities into the existing curriculum that was a combination of my own experience and the school district's guidelines. I also hoped the parents might provide a few ideas about ways to incorporate the activities into the existing curriculum.

The first group meetings were certainly not what I anticipated. I was hoping to work with a large group of adults, yet only four or five parents attended each of the meetings. As a result the parents suggested combining both sessions of kindergarten and meeting again – an idea that turned out to be not only reasonable, but also efficient. Still, although the numbers were small, something happened at those first meetings. Was it that someone was interested in knowing what these families valued about their children's learning? Was it the connection between home and school? Was it the connection between families of children in kindergarten? One parent later explained, *"It started out with Janet wanting our input about what kind of things we wanted the kids to learn throughout the year."* Perhaps that was all it took.

One meeting led to another and yet another. At each meeting we discussed more of the activities on the activity list. We began by scheduling monthly meetings, but as we approached the end of the school year, families wanted to meet every two or three weeks in order to accomplish everything we had planned. In all there were more than ten family meetings where we discussed and designed learning activities for the children in my kindergarten class. What was originally intended to be a single meeting resulted in much more than I ever anticipated. A single meeting with the purpose of identifying learning priorities that might someday be embedded into the curriculum, became a series of ongoing work sessions to plan and prepare for real-life activities that would enrich, enhance, and extend the curriculum and influence the lives of many children and adults.

There was no formal "agenda" at the family meetings. Working through the activity lists provided a natural flow for our conversation. An item on the lists sparked the interest of someone and served as a catalyst for more discussion, helping us organize our thoughts and actions. One parent found that the activity lists *"were great and served as a guide to help keep our discussion focused."* Another thought the activity lists helped facilitate the discussion: *"We just started bouncing ideas back and forth and Janet would say, 'Okay, any ideas?' Someone would say something and then we'd take that a little further. Everybody got involved."*

The energy generated at these meetings spread among the families and the numbers began to grow. One parent described it as "perpetual motion" when he said, *"That list though, that was the one thing because it got us interested and if you can get people interested, they're going to come back to want to learn a little bit more. By the time that happens, perpetual motion just takes over. That's where we are now..."* Without realizing what had happened we had become a team of adults working together to provide better educational opportunities for the children we shared. We were committed to "perpetuating" family involvement and supporting one another in our efforts.

As families became more engaged in their children's education they began to assume new roles and responsibilities. Parents' comments reflected a different way of thinking about teaching and learning and their changing roles in this process. *"How can we incorporate that? I'll do this and you can do that."* Such comments reflected a truer collaboration and sense of shared responsibility. Parents were beginning to see themselves as designers of curriculum. *"I really like the fact that we get to have a say in what they do in kindergarten... You work around whatever she [Janet] has to teach. We just have input in how to do it, what kind of things to do..."* Parents recognized the impact their contributions

were having on the teaching and learning in kindergarten. *"Probably the most exciting part was all the ideas the parents came up with to meet the curriculum requirements...and seeing how excited she [Janet] was about everybody else's ideas. I think this is what really made it take off with all of us."*

It seemed that family involvement had "taken off" in kindergarten. The majority of families had become involved in their children's education in one way or another. Participating in evening meetings was just one way families were getting involved. Others were spending time at home, at school, or in the community supporting their children's education. From the first meeting in November where only four parents came to show their support to the last gathering in June where over one hundred thirty children and adults came together to celebrate their accomplishments, much had changed. These numbers reflect a significant connection between home and school. What had occurred seemed to be a natural evolution where families and teacher began working together to improve the quality of education for their children. Perhaps it "worked" because we were all focused on the children, their learning, and the way the learning became part of their lives.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Let me explain first how I decided to investigate the meetings to better understand parent involvement in curriculum design and teaching. Then I will summarize some of the ways the parents became co-designers of curriculum and co-teachers of my kindergarten students.

Why Practice-Based Research?

It seemed to be a natural evolution: I wanted to better understand the changes that had occurred in my teaching practice as a result of the parent meetings and use of the activity lists. Family involvement became such an integral part of my practice that I wanted to learn more about the involvement that had occurred and perhaps explore possibilities for other types of involvement.

Initially I wondered if I would be able to get families involved in their children's education, but once families were involved, I had a new set of questions to consider. What effect did family involvement have on student learning? How did family involvement affect my teaching? How did this involvement affect the families? Did the involvement have an effect on families' views about teaching and learning? What about the families who did not become involved?

I had engaged in a new practice and decided to use that experience as the focus of a research study. As a first step I began a systematic investigation in the tradition of practice-based research. According to Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994), many experts agree that practitioner research is more effective if done as a collaborative effort with stakeholders or outsiders possessing relevant information and experience. I decided to involve families, the primary stakeholders, as collaborators in this study. I also invited Hafdis to be an outside research collaborator. Dianne Ferguson supported both of us as a coach and critical friend throughout the process.

As a teacher-researcher, I hoped to learn that family involvement had a positive impact on student learning and on my effectiveness as a teacher. I also wanted to know what the families and I had actually accomplished through our work together. Finally, I hoped the families had learned that their involvement made a difference in their child's education. These were my questions, but it was also important that Hafdis and I as co-researchers develop a shared understanding of the focus for this study. We spent time discussing the general area of family involvement and common areas of interest. Through these ongoing discussions we continued to refine my original questions and agreed that we both wanted our practice-based inquiry to help us learn more about the meaning of the family involvement that had occurred as a result of the family meetings.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH/ACTION RESEARCH

The research occurred in two phases. First, Hafdis and I collected retrospective data about the family meetings and my past practices with families so that I could critically reflect on my practice prior to using the activity lists and family meetings to foster more family involvement. We also used these phase one discussions to document and analyze what happened during the initial family meetings and what changes I had made in my teaching in response. Hafdis interviewed me four times to capture these data. The dialogue these interviews generated, and my work with families allowed both of us to critically evaluate the process of involvement, to make adjustments, and to learn from one another's perspectives and experiences. Existing documents and records such as personal notes from meetings with families, journal entries, lesson plans, and written communication to families were also carefully reviewed during this first phase of the study. Phase two involved gathering additional data through observations in my classroom and of family meetings, formal and informal interviews with parents, and ongoing critical self-reflection.

Once Hafdis and I had a shared vision of what we wanted to learn, we also began thinking about what it means to do research as a teacher. Questions that emerged from our discussions included: Can this be research, or is it just part of our job? What is practitioner research, and can it help us understand what is happening? What about action research? Can that approach help? What about validity? Is generalization possible or does it matter?

In order to answer these questions about inquiry and method, we turned to the literature. We learned that "practitioner research is insider research done by practitioners using their own site as their focus of their study" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 2). We also learned that action research is a planned inquiry of formal

investigation of our own work (Schmuck, 1997). Schmuck explains research as a planned, continuous, and systematic procedure for reflecting on professional practice. Practitioner research is a reflective process that requires that some form of evidence be presented in order to support assertions (Anderson et al.). Further, practitioner research is an evolutionary process oriented toward an action or cycle of actions that practitioners take in order to address a given situation, thus action research. As we learned more, practitioner research seemed the most appropriate research method for our situation.

Although practitioner research is a reflective process, it must be undertaken much more systematically than reflective teaching. It requires an intentional plan of action before the research begins (Anderson et al. 1994). According to Anderson and his colleagues (1994), practitioner research provides an opportunity for many voices to be heard. This type of research can express the voices of the practitioners, the students, and the people of the school community, support the improvement of practice, and enable us to bring about educational change.

GATHERING INFORMATION AND EVIDENCE

"Combining the techniques in different ways, called triangulation of data, allows the researcher to maximize time and to see the same scene from different angles" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 114-115). Using different types of documentation enabled us to evaluate, compare, and understand the information. The triangulation of observations, interviews, archives, documents, and reflective discussions helped us increase the trustworthiness and thoroughness of our study. Table 2 reflects the multiple ways in which we gathered data.

We gathered and analyzed multiple documents and archival data to help us better understand the family involvement that was occurring. A "first hand account of events such as personal diaries, letters, and official records" (Anderson et al., 1994) is one of the main sources of information in history. In our research, we collected various forms of written documentation throughout the school year, including written communication between school and home, summaries of learning activities, and official assessment results that provided an important source of data.

Interviewing families gave us insight into their feelings and views toward involvement in education and how they interpreted their own involvement. Hafdis conducted seventeen informal interviews with families near the end of the school year. We recognized that by interviewing only seventeen of the forty families, some data would be missing. Fortunately, the families interviewed were not all involved in their children's education in the same ways, allowing us to study the different types of involvement that had occurred.

We also conducted observations during family meetings and recorded them through in-depth fieldnotes and audiotapes. In addition to observations of family meetings, Hafdis conducted classroom observations on numerous occasions. Reflective conversations between the researchers and advisor occurred throughout the study, both in person and on the telephone. Some conversations were audio taped while others were documented by note taking.

After the individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed, we conducted a focus group session with twelve parents. During the focus group, initial interpretations of the data were shared with families, allowing us to check our emerging understanding of the data with our family collaborators. We also engaged the participants in a group discussion about their involvement and about our work together, which provided additional data for consideration.

After an extensive analysis of the interviews, reflections, and observations, we conducted another member check with ten parents participating. We shared our findings in an effort to seek final clarification and reflection. This session was also our

TABLE 2: MULTIPLE METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Reflections	*Archives & Documents*	*Interviews*	*Observations*
• relationship with families • family involvement • using activity lists • learning activities • relationship with colleagues	• individual performance goals • family to family communication • teacher to family communication • activity lists • summary of activities • informal parent feedback • journal • lesson plans • assessment results • video	• individual parents • focus group • member check • informal conversations with families	• parent meetings • Janet's classroom

attempt to bring closure to our work together although parents continued to show interest in the status of our research by asking for regular updates.

ANALYSES

From the beginning of the study, we periodically reflected on the data in order to understand what was happening and plan next steps. This helped us keep the research focused and adapt our research methods when needed. In the spring of the school year, we began a more analytic look at the data We reviewed the activity lists and field notes from the meetings and summarized the activity lists to better understand what the families and I had accomplished. We looked at the learning activities that had been planned and implemented. We assessed who was participating in the various planning and teaching events and how they were participating. We reported our emerging findings to the families and continued our work together. Several parents also summarized our work from the family meetings that provided yet another perspective of the work in which we were all engaged. We also looked at the letters written by parents and grandparents to families informing them of our work. We summarized the content of these letters and documented who had written them. After transcribing the family interviews, we reviewed their content in an attempt to understand what the families were telling us about their involvement. This better prepared us for the focus group interview and later for the member check. We would engage in an even more intense examination of these interviews during the final stages of analysis.

The final analysis of the data was a collaborative effort among the three collaborators, allowing us to discuss our interpretations, raise questions, view the information from a perspective other than our own, and begin assigning meaning to the mounds of information. As we worked together, we began to see patterns emerge in the data. We discussed ways to organize the data and began to group the information into categories. We read and reread the data, discussed our thoughts and reactions, compared and contrasted information, and coded the data until every piece of meaningful information was categorized. After grouping the data by themes, we wrote summaries for each theme and found quotations from families that elaborated the summaries. Eventually, we realized that it was time to stop our reflection and tell our story.

Parents as Co-Designers of Curriculum

I expect that families became involved in their children's education for many different reasons. Perhaps these parents speak for others as well as themselves when they explain, *"We are the people that want to make sure our children have a positive experience. We have a great commitment to support our children."* I too wanted to ensure that my students had the most positive learning experience possible and was committed to support them in their learning. However, my commitment broadened to include not only the children but their families as well. Together, we were better for the children.

Our research demonstrated that family meetings were a significant avenue for involvement. *"I know what it was for me and I know the rewards that I've gotten out of it. I'm kind of curious as to what made some of the other people come back"* captures our conclusions and our ongoing questions. Many parents identified the activity-based assessment (Ferguson et al., 1998) as what got them thinking about teaching and learning and helped focus our work together during the meetings. *"It all boils down to that very first sheet [ABA] that she handed out. That kind of like opened up our eyes and that was the thing..."* Another parent explained, *"I think that the way to get parents involved is that list because it's broken down so well and it gives you so many different avenues of thinking. The list is a very good tool."*

A closer look at the make up of the family meetings may help explain the increase in numbers of families involved. The number of people varied, as did the participants themselves. There were a total of forty families with children enrolled in my kindergarten classes. Of those forty families, about thirteen were represented at most of the evening meetings. An additional seven families were represented at some meetings, while another six families were represented at a few meetings. The remaining fourteen families were not at any of the evening meetings. However, not attending the family meetings in no way suggests that these families were not involved in their children's education in some manner.

"Representation" as we used it refers to attendance of one or more adult family member. In some cases representation alternated among adults within a family, while in other cases more than one adult attended meetings regularly. In other situations only one adult represented the family at the meetings.

A profile of these forty families provides some interesting and useful information about who attended and who became involved in other aspects of their children's education. Families represented varied cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds as well as diverse family structures. The majority of the children were living at home with both birth parents. In about eight families the parents were divorced or in the process of divorce. Of these eight families, five parents were remarried or living with a significant other. Grandparents were the legal guardians in three families. Single parents were raising their children in two of the families. Many of the children whose parents were attending meetings regularly were the first or only child in the family to enter the public school system. Other family members participating in the meetings included aunts, uncles, and adult siblings. Precisely who each of the participants were and the exact number of meetings each attended was not as important as the fact that family involvement reached well beyond the evening meetings, resulting in a more comprehensive model of family involvement than I had known in all my years of teaching.

Greetings fellow kindergarten parents.

I wanted to recap the December meeting for the parents that were unable to attend. We had quite a turnout by combining both classes and decided to do it every month. Our next meeting is planned for January 8th, so if at all possible mark that night down (even if it means bringing the kids) and come and join us at 6:00. It's very rewarding for me to be involved with my son's education and the quality of that education. I'm sure most of you feel the same but with working, the kids, the house, and everything that goes along with it we kind of lose sight of things. That is why the meetings have been so rewarding for me. I get to know what he will be doing and how it will be done first hand. We, as parents talk about what our kids do, how they act, and how they accomplish daily tasks with ease. Like getting them to sort laundry, wear their bike helmet and learn values. Some of the things we have planned for this year are learning about bike safety, reiterating stranger awareness and learning to use 911 effectively. We have also decided to do a mystery book, a holiday exchange of a hand made gift, and writing to a kindergarten class in Germany. All these ideas come from us parents and what we would like to see our children learning, not only in school, but in the home too. So, if you can spare and hour or so on January 8th, come and join us. Your thoughts and suggestions are greatly valued by our little ones, and together we can make a difference in our children's lives. I look forward to seeing you there!"

Figure 2. Sample Letter

Getting families involved turned out to be a natural process, though one that required both planning and persistence. At each meeting we discussed strategies for including more families and the gradual increase provided evidence that some of these strategies were working. One strategy involved alternating meeting times to accommodate various family schedules. Childcare and transportation also helped encourage more families to attend, and personal invitations from me and other families brought several families "on board."

FAMILIES TALKING TO FAMILIES

Written communication between families was one of the most important strategies we discovered. After each meeting a parent agreed to write a letter informing other families about our work together and inviting them to participate at home, at school, or in the community. Early on participants were reluctant to write the letters, but as time passed they gladly accepted the responsibility. Figure 2 captures one of these letters.

Parents or grandparents wrote at least fifteen letters. Each typically included a summary of the meeting, information about activities for learning at home, school, and in the community, and an invitation for families to get involved in future meetings. These family to family letters communicated, like the example in Figure 2, a willingness to do whatever possible to enable families to attend: *"Hope to see you all at the next meeting! If anyone needs a ride or has anything to share but can't make the meeting, please give me a call..."* As important as the invitation was the appreciation for involvement expressed in nearly all family to family letters: *"...Speaking of doing it all, we have planned and executed over forty activities this year, Yeah team!!!"* The letters also shared personal thoughts about the future: *"As the end of the year quickly approaches, we are faced with the reality of getting split up and going to first grade. We have made many new friends, and have learned quite a lot from each other in the year we've spent together. I'm sure next year will be no different than this year was. Once we get in and get started, there will be no stopping us!"*

It would have been impossible for me to write these letters. I could not have informed or invited other family members with the same style or charm. As I reviewed the letters, I better understood the influence these parents had on one another and how passionate they were about our work together.

TEACHER TALKING TO FAMILIES

I also tried to encourage the involvement of families with my own letters. The purpose of these letters was also to inform and invite families. Though I had no intent to replace the family-to-family letters, my letters provided additional information and invitation. I wrote thirty-seven letters to families during the school year that contained general information such as schedules, procedures, and school events as well as a significant amount of information about what I was teaching. I also revealed much about my personal and professional life by sharing stories about my family, my background, and my views on teaching and learning. I openly communicated my feelings and views about the relationships that evolved with my students and their families.

"Never before have I felt so connected with the people surrounding my students' personal lives. I believe part of this sense of "family" stems from our meetings prior to the start of the school year. I also believe this closeness has occurred as a result of the support you all show towards your children's educational experience. You have demonstrated this support in many ways. Spending time with us in the classroom, attending monthly family meetings, and helping your children complete homework assignments are some of the ways in which you have shown you care. Thank you for giving so much of yourselves to the teaching and learning in kindergarten. Trust me, your contribution has made a significant impact on the lives of many children, not just your own." February 1997

"...teaching and learning goes both ways. I can't begin to tell you all I have learned from you and your children so far this year. Thank you." March 1997

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"A number of parents have been making plans and preparations for a special project this week... We are planning to engage in the art of sewing and each child will be making his/her own teddy bear. This should be an especially fun and meaningful learning experience for us all! If there are any of you who would like to lend a hand, we would love to have you join us in this project..." April 1997

My final letter of the school year was perhaps one of the most difficult letters I have ever written. It was my effort to bring closure to a most extraordinary year of teaching and learning and working with others:

"Rather than school being about an exchange between teacher and child, it came to be about children and adults teaching and learning and working together – kindergarten children, their parents, grandparents, siblings, teacher, and others sharing the school experience. Together, we were able to offer meaningful educational opportunities for the children. I believe our work as a team, resulted in the children acquiring a solid foundation on which to build a lifetime of learning. Thank you for your interest, your input, and the active role you have taken in your child's education. Without you, this year would not have brought about such benefits for all." June 1997

Parents as Co-Teachers

Those of us engaged in this collaboration believed our work was making a difference for the children. As one parent said, *"It doesn't only have to do with school work, it has to do with the children's well-being."* The Activity Based Assessment Inventory (Ferguson, et al., 1998) served as a guide for our family meetings. During the school year, we discussed over fifty activities from these lists. We planned and implemented over thirty activities at school or in the community. A number of activities were recommended for implementation at home. Table 3 shows

TABLE 3: ACTIVITY LIST ITEMS THAT BECAME CURRICULUM

Items Implemented

- Using the clock and calendar.
- Daily schedule done in class.
- Cleanliness signs posted in bathrooms.
- ID cards for children.
- Presentation on 911 by grandfather.
- Children made signs that are seen around school community.
- Children use "office" center with items provided by families.
- Seating arrangements to build relationships between children.
- Children wrote to secret pals.
- Children cooperate in food prep during snack time.
- Children assume roles of set up, serving and cleanup at snack time.
- Sharing books from home through "book share."
- Purchases additional software for children.
- Additional computer time made possible for children.
- Collins Cycle Shop presented a safety class.
- Field trip to WISTEC.
- Purchased board games for children.
- Performed a sewing project (teddy bears).
- Collected junk and made 100's charts.
- Polaroid camera purchased and using it.
- Mde plaster handprints of each child.
- Shared nursery rhymes with children.
- Presentation about bus safety.
- Homework notebooks.
- Decorated grocery bags for Price Choppers.
- Field trip to Price Choppers.
- Collected food, clothing, toys and books for donation.
- Presentation from First Place Families homeless shelter.
- Field trip to Pepsi.
- These projects were discussed, researched, planned, or completely done by families.

TABLE 4: ACTIVITIES DESIGNED AND TAUGHT WITH PARENTS

Items from ABA	*Ideas Generated*	*Roles/Responsibilities*	*Outcome*
PERSONAL CARE: washing hands and face	support children in hand washing	MA will make signs for boys and girls restrooms.	signs are displayed in restrooms
	germ presentation	M to lead presentation about germs and direct students in disinfecting of classroom with rubbing alcohol and rubber gloves.	M presented information about germs Students disinfected classroom
PERSONAL CARE: responding to emergencies	presentation on 911	M's grandfather W, a retired firechief, offered to direct presentation on 911.	W presented information about responding to emergencies.
	identification cards for children.	MA will inquire about organizations that may offer this service.	MA designed format for ID cards, worte letter to families to gather data, made cards including photo and thumbprint for each student with permission.
PERSONAL MANAGEMENT: keeping/following schedule	discussion of how children enjoy calendars, schedules.	teacher will begin reviewing daily schedule with students	students assist teacher in writing and following schedule of daily activities
BEING A FRIEND: social activities	have students draw names and make cards or pictures for secret pal	C will write letter to parents explaining secret pals and come to class for drawing of names	students enjoyed making things for secret pals next time would allow class time for students to make gifts
MEDIA: books, newspapers, magazines	families discussed favorite books and magazines would like to give students opportunity to share with others – book share	K will get book bags or folders for books	book bags purchased, families sent letter explaining book share students take turns bringing reading material from home
EXERCISE AND FITNESS: riding bike	bicycle safety presentation	K's grandmother G will contact police and arrange presentation	G arranged for olcal cycle shop to give presentation on bicycle safety
ENTERTAINMENT **EVENTS:** going to planetarium	discussion of planetarium and possibilities of field trip	K will inquire about laser light show and other shows at planetarium	K shared findings about planetarium decision to request funds from PTA for field trip; funds granted wonderful learning experience
GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES: playing games	purchasing board games for classroom	H family will prepare list of suggested games	H family submitted wish list, teacher reviews and requested purchase order H family picked up games

TABLE 4: *Continued*

Items from ABA	*Ideas Generated*	*Roles/Responsibilities*	*Outcome*
GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES: video computer games	increase student opportunity to use computer	B will investigate software	B reported findings; software was purchased for classroom use L will come to school Mondays and Wednesdays to spend time with students on computers.
GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES: sewing	discussed having children sew stuffed animals	T will price supplies will bring bear she made while in kindergarten to next meeting	T purchased pattern book J talked with students and they are looking forward to project K and T purchased supplies actifity tremendous success
GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES: collecting	discussion about possible collections, decided to have children collect all kinds of junk and make group chart of 100 different things	A will write letter to families explaining project ask for junk to be sent to school	children numbered charts to 100, bring in junk to glue on chart many skills practiced including cooperation, numberal writing, counting
GAMES, CRAFTS, HOBBIES: languages	F knows nursery rhymes in French, father-in-law knows Italian discussion of mursery rhymes as possible topic for thematic study	J will talk with kindergarten teachers about incorporating mursery rhymes into plans L and M will bring in audio/video tapes with mursery rhymes	kindergarten studies nursery rhymes as part of school-wide thematic study of literature over time F shared rhymes in French w/class A made copies of rhymes in English and French for children to take home
SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP: doing homework	discussion of expanding opportunities for home-school connections of student learning would like more family involvement in learning through homework	J will purchase homework notebooks for students, write letter to families explaining where idea originated and details of homework procedures	homework notebooks became important part of learning in kindergarten with majority of children participating
COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP: volunteering	explanation of service learning projects idea for possible projects discussed student suggestions reviewed am class would like to decorate grocery bags for shoppers pm class would like to give things to homeless	students will make final selection for service learning projects R, grocery store manager, offers to donate, display, and use decorated bags at store if selected by students R will make arrangements for field trip to store L will research homeless shelters if project selected	am students decorated grocery bags pm students collected food, clother, toys, and books for needy families R and crew arranged, carried out field trip to deliver bags and tour store L arranged for school visitation and talk from homeless shelter rep. children loaded collected items into truck; were offered tour of facilities, declinded in best interest of children

a parent-generated summary that was provided to families of the children in kindergarten. Other such summaries were created by parents at various times throughout the school year to inform families of our work together.

I also periodically summarized our work together. Table 4 provides a sampling of learning activities designed and taught by families. Notice how one activity from the lists generated ideas for a number of additional activities. This illustrates how the activity-based assessment provided a frame for our work, but in no way limited our creative thinking and planning.

Summarized in a table it is hard to see the degree of involvement and amount of responsibility assumed by family members. Of course this involvement and responsibility varied from family to family. Some adults were involved in discussions and decision making even though they were not present at the meetings. Some adults assumed responsibly for designing and delivering an entire learning activity, while others took responsibility for just a part. One father's experience illustrates that no amount of involvement or investment in teaching and learning is too small to lead to benefits for all involved:

> *"I went in one day for like a half an hour to teach some nursery rhymes. We were talking about different languages [at a family meeting]. Well, ever since [our son] was a little baby, we used to put him to sleep by doing some nursery rhymes in French. And his grandpa is Italian so he says some words to [our son] in Italian... Well, we were talking about that one sheet [from ABA] it was on languages. We had scribbled that sheet full the first time. We just wrote that [our son] knows nursery rhymes in French. Then when it came to language, Janet said, "Anything about that?" ...So when it got to where they were doing a thing on nursery rhymes in class, I came into the classroom for like a half hour. We sat down and I helped them cut out some puppets and some of the kids colored and stuff. Then we all got in a circle and we all took off our shoes and we all sat there and did "This Little Piggy Went to Market." [My wife] typed up the English version on the computer so they had all the words that they could share at home. When I first did it, I told them to see if they could guess which nursery rhyme it was. Then I'd do the nursery rhyme in French. Then a couple of them would raise their hand and they would just guess and they would know it. It was just a kick seeing twenty-two kids and Mrs. Williams sitting there on the floor. Then at the end of the day when they went through what they liked about the day, a couple of them said they liked doing the nursery rhymes. It was just really cute. Then I came in to pick [our son] up from school a couple of days later and one of the little girls said, "Can you do This Little Piggy in that language again?" So I just sat there and I did it for her again. So it's just neat. That's the thing that really shocked me. It's something that little, that goofy and they liked it. When kids like the things they do at school, that's the way you want to get them started. Then down the road if it's fun for them and if they enjoy it. Then as the years go down, they're going to like it even more. That's some satisfaction just seeing a little child smile like that and get so much appreciation that's just a half hour out of my day."*

While the ways parents chose to become involved in teaching and learning varied, nearly all of the forty families participated. At least sixteen adults representing fifteen families taught in our classroom on a regular basis. Another sixteen adults representing eleven families came to help teach occasionally. Ten families focused on attending special events. Some of these families also accompanied the children on community outings. Nearly all the families attended parent-teacher conferences.

Only two families were not very involved in one or more of these ways. We may never understand the barriers that made it more difficult for some than others. Still, one of these two families demonstrated a strong involvement by making sure their child attended school regularly and by helping him with homework. As a consequence of this slightly less visible involvement, their son experienced substantial social, emotional, and academic growth. The other family attended our year-end celebration. While this was certainly the most limited involvement any of the forty families demonstrated, perhaps it promised a beginning that would grow in subsequent years.

While family involvement varied, we identified three patterns in the ways family members were able to support their sons' and daughters' learning. Let me briefly illustrate each.

TEACHING AT SCHOOL

When discussing their involvement in the classroom, many parents described their role as assisting the teacher and helping the children. They worked directly with the children. Sometimes they guided the children through activities, presented new information or ideas, re-taught skills and concepts I had introduced earlier, or worked with small groups or individual students. In all cases they gave the children their time and attention.

"I walk around from table to table" explained one mother, *"I listen to the teacher and just follow her instructions. I try to be just another arm, another set of eyes and ears..."* When I asked if she thought she did any of the teaching, she answered decisively, *"No, I left that to the teacher."* She elaborates, *"I hear what she's telling them, [then] I'll spend a few minutes with a child and do what she says to help them through. But otherwise I have no formal education on teaching."* Although this mother did not label her work with the children as teaching I would argue that the strategy she described is an effective method for teaching or re-teaching concepts.

Despite not always seeing themselves as teachers, there were two ways that involvement in the classroom exceeded family members' expectations. Generally they had not expected to become so actively involved in the children's learning: *"It's more than I expected. I didn't expect to be there once a week and I didn't*

expect a teacher to let me do as much as Janet has allowed us to do." Nor had they expected to become so interested in the lives and learning of children other than their own. *"I didn't realize that I would totally fall in love with all of the kids. It's amazing to watch them learn."*

Some families hoped to be more involved at school, but struggled to realize this commitment. *"I expected to be more involved and I am not, but it is because of my work schedule. That was disappointing to me and still is. I struggle with that on a daily basis. I can't be as involved in school as I would like because I have to provide for us in other ways."*

Ironically, this same parent who agonized over not being as involved as she had hoped provided the children with one of their most memorable learning experiences. During a discussion at one of the family meetings she offered to teach a lesson on germs. The lesson was carefully designed and delivered. She shared basic information about germs, showed a brief video, and led a discussion. She brought surgical gloves, masks, and spray bottles filled with disinfectant and guided the students through an effort to "de-germ" our classroom. Quality involvement did not depend on quantity. This parent's contribution was substantial and substantive.

Over and over again the parents provided learning experiences that would have been impossible for me to provide alone. In fact just having a number of adults in the classroom made a great difference to the children and their learning: *"I remember one time when I looked around, there were twenty children and probably six adults in the classroom. You had more parents in there and the ratio went down so the kids had more one on one. I think that was a big help too."* The ratio may not have always been this high, but it was not uncommon for more than three adults to be in the classroom at any given time. Families had become an integral part of kindergarten teaching and learning.

Sometimes I was able to help parents surmount barriers to classroom involvement. One mother rode the bus to school and Janet offered to take her home. *"We don't have a car or a phone. I'll probably end up more involved than I am now – get my bike fixed and start coming over and see how she's doing and volunteering. It's fun for me...it's like learning all over again."* Despite the fact that this mother was unable to get her bike fixed, she continued to ride the bus to school and became a more frequent classroom participant.

TEACHING IN THE COMMUNITY

Learning in the community is an effective strategy for helping children make connections between learning and life. Getting involved in this aspect of learning was a priority for many families. Parents and grandparents wanted to link school and home by creating opportunities for the children to learn outside the classroom and to bring the community into the classroom. They designed and delivered outings and presentations. These lessons, designed and taught by families, provided another avenue for involvement. Since these special events were also more occasional, they provided a more convenient opportunity for working parents to be involved. Perhaps such lessons are also more interesting because they help family members as well as children see more connections between learning and life.

One of our ventures was an outing to a grocery store, an idea we first discussed at a family meeting. Parents and grandparents took the children to the store where one of the fathers was store manager. He and his co-workers guided us through the store. Carefully planned to emphasize new experiences, the children sampled uncommon fruits and vegetables, watched the butcher prepare several kinds of meat, and scanned and bagged their own snack foods. It was an extraordinary field trip that provided more than the obvious benefits. *"My husband helped organize the field trip to his store... It's neat to have kids go to their parents' place of work just to get a general idea of what mom and dad are doing when they are away all day. It's one way to keep parents involved and it is a learning experience at the same time."*

Other similarly remarkable community experiences followed. A grandmother planned and helped teach a lesson on bicycle safety given by a representative from a local cycle shop. A grandfather who was also a retired fire chief organized and taught the lesson about emergency procedures. As one parent said, *"A teacher cannot do all that. They need some help and I think our children's lives have been a lot better because of this,"* and indeed families orchestrated and taught most of our community learning events. In fact, the field trips became more like family outings with mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings joining in and sharing the experience.

TEACHING AT HOME

There were many ways families involved themselves in their children's learning at home. Both my letters and the family letters included suggestions. These communications became a vital link between home and school. *"Keeping us informed about everything you're doing really helps. It involves parents whether they want to get involved or not. You send home the Monday envelope; it's got all the information in there. They read it and they have to get involved."*

Homework was an important way to support learning and an effective way to make connections between home and school. I encouraged families to reinforce and expand upon classroom learning experiences at home and in other places outside of school. Many families reported reviewing papers from school, reading books from the school library, participating in an at-home reading program, and working with letters, words, and number concepts. Some families, however, went well beyond my suggestions. For example, one mom ordered a parenting magazine and read about how to do simple tasks with her daughter. *"We look through the magazines...toys and food shopping*

ads and coupons and she likes to look at the mail, too. She can go through it and pick out the 'w' words and things for her homework."

Another parent felt that *"education is everything. I've explained to my children that we are poor, so college is something you are going to have to earn and work for."* Her daughter, though, "loves school. *She tells me about her whole day...all of it...she enjoys it. She wanted to learn how to make her letters. Now her goal is to read...I didn't really know how to begin teaching her but Mrs. Williams sends home all kinds of different homework...so it makes it much easier...She looks at the pictures and kind of reads the little books [home reading program]...I've been making lists of key words and having her write them. Words like /at/ and /is/."*

Parents, grandparents, siblings and, in at least one instance, neighbors were among those who shared responsibility for supporting children at home. *"We all live in the trailer park together so they all play together. They're best friends and sometimes they come down 'cause they have the same homework and they do their homework together at the house. I'll just start gathering up supplies and we'll go sit on the couch at the coffee table... I've been a stay at home mom for eleven years and it's fun to have something to do. I have a lot of time on my hands."*

What Did It All Mean?

It has been awhile since I began asking questions about family involvement. I am now certain of my answers. I was sincerely interested in building partnerships with families and it is clear to me now that when not left to chance, careful planning and persistence can create real partnership. All forty families in this study became involved in their children's education to some degree, though involvement was manifested in many different ways. Certainly we defined involvement broadly. Some might argue, for example, that attendance at a school social function is not really parental involvement. I believe, however, that even such a modest activity is a starting point for some families. *"Everyone is their own person, but we all have one thing in common. We care about what happens to our kids and we want to be involved with that. That's the one thing that we all share."* An even more important result of our work is the impact the families' involvement had on both the children and the adults. Let me end this account by reviewing some of these impacts.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Having parents around piqued students' interest, increased their enjoyment, and fed their motivation. Connecting home, school, and community also extended learning by taking it beyond the classrooms and making it a natural part of our students' young life routines. Students achieved.

Families attributed much of students' learning and growth to the environment and culture of learning we created together. It was an environment where learning was interesting and purposeful, and where everybody's excited about learning and things are always going on. All of this excitement for learning resulted in many children experiencing a most successful and enjoyable first year in school. One mother felt her son *"really has had a good time this year... I think that because of Janet and all the parents and their participation, it has been a wonderful kindergarten experience that would not have happened before... I do feel like he's learned a lot more and it's been lots more fun."*

Not only did the children enjoy learning, they also experienced social, emotional, and academic growth as a result of family involvement. One example of social/emotional development occurred for a youngster who was reluctant to interact with his peers and speak out in class. This social challenge was overcome through our collective efforts. The boy's mother felt *"that by sharing things with the teacher, we have helped our son speak up in class. That was one thing I was worried about... Just recently, we managed to get him to raise his hand and speak up in class!"*

Through their involvement, families connected with other families and built relationships that resulted in what one mother referred to as a wider circle of friends for the children. *"My son had a hard time making friends here at first. But when we became more active, we got to know the parents and kids. We would get together for birthday parties, soccer games... So I've noticed that he has a wider circle of close friends and that makes him feel more comfortable in school."*

Family involvement also helped the children acquire skills in areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, and the arts. A number of family members, like this mother, credited learning success to family interest and involvement. *"She's reading! I can't believe how well she's reading for kindergarten... She loves to read, she loves to write... If we hadn't shown interest, how's she supposed to show interest?"* For another parent, *"It helped his learning. It helps that he knows that I care enough to be here."*

A natural result of being a successful learner was a new sense of pride among the children for their accomplishments, but also pride that their parents were involved in their learning. The children enjoyed having other children's parents show an interest in their learning. Being important to the other children was a satisfying revelation for one father who shared, *"At the end of class, Janet has them talk about their favorite thing of the day and what they wish they could have done differently... She asked four of the kids and three out of the four said the thing they liked the most was that I came in... Just hearing that was like... All I did was I just basically helped out with little things..."*

Another connection we forged between home, school, and the community was how often and comfortably children talked about their school experiences. One mom explained, *"In the beginning, he never told me anything. So I think it has a lot to do with me coming to school that he's telling me now. I ask him and I know what to ask him about."* As families became more aware of what was going on in their children's school life, they were able to ask better questions. Getting children to talk about their learning

led to more ways parents could support their efforts at home. *"I think that my involvement in the classroom has made me understand the stuff that comes home. My knowledge of what they're doing in the classroom has helped me with the homework because I am aware of what they do. So in that way it's helped me work with her more efficiently."*

Being in the classroom also helped the parents collect teaching strategies that transferred to teaching at home. *"I know what's happening and I know there are certain phrases that the teacher will use... When she comes home and has trouble with reading or writing, I can say it the way the teacher says it, use the same words. If I wasn't in class and didn't know, she probably wouldn't be moving as quickly."*

IMPACT ON ADULTS

As they reflected on the school year, most of the adults expressed great satisfaction with their involvement. They recalled some of their reasons for getting involved initially and for maintaining their involvement throughout the year. They described a "place" that reached beyond the walls of our classroom where everyone was treated equally, where everyone felt welcomed and valued, and where different points of view were respected and encouraged. The parents felt their relationship with me was mutually supportive and personal.

> *"She's just so friendly. She reads people well. She was able to find out what was important to us and talk to us like we talk to her. We have people that aren't as educated or whatever, and she doesn't talk above their head or talk to them like they're any different. You know what I mean? They're a parent of a student in her class. She treats everybody with respect and it doesn't matter. The most important thing is that you're the parent of this child. The doors are always open and the parents are encouraged to come as much as possible... She definitely wants us there, you can tell."*

As a result of their involvement, adults gained new understandings about teaching and learning, and developed insights about young children and their learning they may not have otherwise acquired. One mom reflected, *"All the children are so different and they learn so differently."* A father discovered, *"school is a lot like life..."*

Some adults learned about themselves as well. One mother wished that *"Now that I've come to this school, I really wish I was teaching."* A grandparent, who became involved later in the school year, compared her experience to those she had with schools when her children were young. *"I think you are gathering people and you get a lot of ideas. I could maybe contribute ideas, but I don't know what I would add, because we didn't do this when my kids were little. I wish we had. I think the parents are either interested or they are not. If they are interested, your kids come first above everything else and I think that is the way it should be."*

Many new relationships formed between adults and children, as well as among the adults that may not have otherwise developed. One father described the relationships he developed with children in his son's class and the fondness with which he watched them grow. *"That's a neat thing, you see them out in public and they wave and smile... You get the chance to meet the kids that are in class with your child... It would be amazing to see how much all of them have grown, how much all of them have changed... That's what's neat."* A mother found that, *"We became a support group, not just with what was going on in school, but what we were dealing with in our kids. How the changes in their lives were impacting them. It was nice to know that everybody else was going through stuff like that."* The supportive relationships that developed between the adults still endure. Even though the new school year separated families into four classrooms, many of the families maintained their relationships with each other and with me. According to one mother, *"It has become like a family. You don't just say, I'm sorry, this is the end of the year and now you have to find another family."* Another mother's comments well summarize the partnership that evolved during our year together. *"It's been a terrific year! I'm really pleased. Not just with Janet, but with the whole team – Janet and all the parents and everyone. I felt like it was such a wonderful team to have working with the kids."* The relationships may change over time, but it is likely they will not be forgotten.

IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Recounting these events has caused me to think about how this family involvement affected me as a teacher and the teaching and learning that resulted. It has been a difficult task. Certainly, it is clear to me that the teaching and learning described here would not have been possible without the families' involvement. The richness of ideas and opportunities afforded the children in kindergarten would have been impossible for me to provide single handedly. The countless hours we spent together working collaboratively and collectively for the benefit of the children were hours well spent. During the focus group session a parent observed, *"I have never seen so many parents involved to this degree, or a teacher... This is like the ideal, what a lot of teachers would want to happen. I don't know how you did it, but congratulations. This is like the ideal thing and this is what everybody talks about and then it never happens."*

When I embarked on this change in my practice, I worried that I would not be able to really make it happen. Real partnerships had seemed so elusive in schools despite teachers' almost unanimous support of the idea. But as one of the parents observed, *"I think there are parents that are afraid and there are teachers that are afraid. And that's what's hard is getting them together."* This study shows that many of these fears can be overcome. Some teachers may be afraid of allowing families to become too involved. This study suggests that the greatest thing to fear may be not allowing families to become involved enough. When family involvement becomes an important part of one's

teaching practice, positive outcomes for the children and adults will likely result.

Next Steps Toward Ongoing Involvement

The families involved in this study wanted to stay involved. As a group they hoped for similar relationships with future teachers and a continuation of shared responsibility in teaching and learning. *"I would love for all teachers to be so caring and to ensure that parents are responsible for their children's education and are involved."* Some of the parents began to strategize about how to keep the family meetings going in the future *"even if it was only every six weeks... All the parents in the class would come and the teacher would tell us what they're going to be doing, and ask if any of us have any ideas. That's what I think a lot of us really want,"* this father felt, *"for that type of situation to continue."*

As families began to explore options for future involvement, they considered the organized parent teacher group as an alternative. They recognized the Parent Teacher Association was an organization with a school-wide focus, but they were hopeful that their involvement would be meaningful and would, as one parent said, *"take the place of some of what we have now."* Another parent voiced caution about this option saying, *"The PTA – deep down inside, I really don't think that's what any of us really want, to be limited to that. The PTA is such a broad area and you don't see immediate results. You're just not involved in what's happening in your kid's class."*

Despite their current enthusiasm, some families recognized that their involvement would change as their children grew older. Rather than supporting children in the classroom, the school would likely become the focus for their involvement. *"I think your involvement will be more, not in the classroom as much, but maybe the school more; a broader range. I think that when they get older they want their own space and they don't want mom or dad hanging around. But you can help in the office or in the library or with school projects. I just think it'll shift a little bit."* No matter what form their future involvement takes, families hope their contributions will be appreciated and respected.

I shared the parents' hopes for the future. I planned to continue building similar relationships with new families. I, too, wanted a repeat of our year together. One parent offered this bit of advice, *"Let the new group of parents grow at their own pace. Not show them what it should be or what it will be, but let them grow at their own pace..."* So, as the next year started, I engaged in a similar practice of involving families. This time a new group of children and their families were the focus. We were working together toward the same goal: providing a quality education for the children in kindergarten. It was happening again, the cycle continues.

Having said that let me also offer a caution. This project may have set a precedent for family involvement that might be difficult to achieve again for both me and the families. This experience left many of us with rather high expectations for future involvement. I continue to worry that in our collective effort to provide the children with an excellent education, we were setting ourselves up for future disappointment. In time, we will better understand the answer to this question. In the meantime, one of the mothers offers this thought.

> *"You are an exceptional person. You give more of yourself than most people give and that shows. It shows in your whole classroom. It shows in all of our children. You've done an excellent, excellent job. And now we are all spoiled. You've set us up for disappointment."*

A second caution we learned about was that a few children had a difficult time adjusting to having their parents or grandparents in the classroom. We had to guard against those few children becoming dependent on their parents and withdrawing from activities. One of the mothers worried when she started in the classroom that her son would only be with her. *"Right at first he was a little clingy. I told him that if he was not going to participate in class, I would have to stop coming. It is just a matter of him learning that I want to be part of his life at school but that he needs to share me; because he is an only child, he has a hard time doing that."*

Final Reflections

In the end, I have to conclude that my effort to better involve families was successful. By the end of the year, even the most reluctant of families participated in some way. Some families were more actively or more visibly involved, while others were more subtle about their involvement. Nevertheless the most important thing this study taught me was that all families can become involved in their children's education, and that involvement makes a difference in the lives of children. The families and I learned that with regard to family involvement, the "whole" was greater than the sum of the parts and much greater than any one part alone. Working together toward a common goal brought a strength and richness to our effort. Working in isolation from parents I would never have been as effective nor have been able to offer the children the quality of education we were able to achieve collectively.

Postscript

One difficulty with accounts like Janet's is that readers might conclude that this is just a story of a very good teacher and no other teacher could achieve anything similar. Janet is a very good teacher, but those who demonstrate new possibilities and directions for any field usually are exceptional.

While I cannot prevent any reader from dismissing this account as an anomaly, I can report ripple effects from Janet's work. A fourth grade teacher in the school became intrigued enough with Janet's work to talk with her about trying to have family meetings in her own classroom. She has met with the parents during orientation, sent home the activity lists and will soon hold her first parent meeting. Janet's groups of parents continue

to approach each new teacher their sons and daughters encounter with an expectation grounded in the wisdom of experience. Some teachers have welcomed the parents into their classrooms and, over time, perhaps their presence will produce new ripples in the school. The parents have recently decided to begin having family meetings again and invite the teachers.

As a teacher educator I have shared the experiences of Janet, Hafdis, and many other talented teachers through the materials they have helped me prepare, including the curriculum planning module and the activity-based assessment that first attracted Janet's interest. Each of these teachers has another story like Janet's. An important message of this account for me is that more teachers should, like Janet, be helped to tell their stories. Teachers are always the real agents of change in education. If we knew more about their efforts and successes we might more quickly achieve better schooling results for children and youth.

The students that were in Janet's class during the year of this research project are now in third grade. The parents who became most regularly and actively involved in the kindergarten family meetings remain the most active parents in school governance, as site council representatives and fund raising volunteers.

Monthly Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings typically attract approximately 30-35 parents. About half of those who attend regularly, and virtually all of those in active leadership roles, are parents whose children started their formal schooling in Janet's Kindergarten.

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